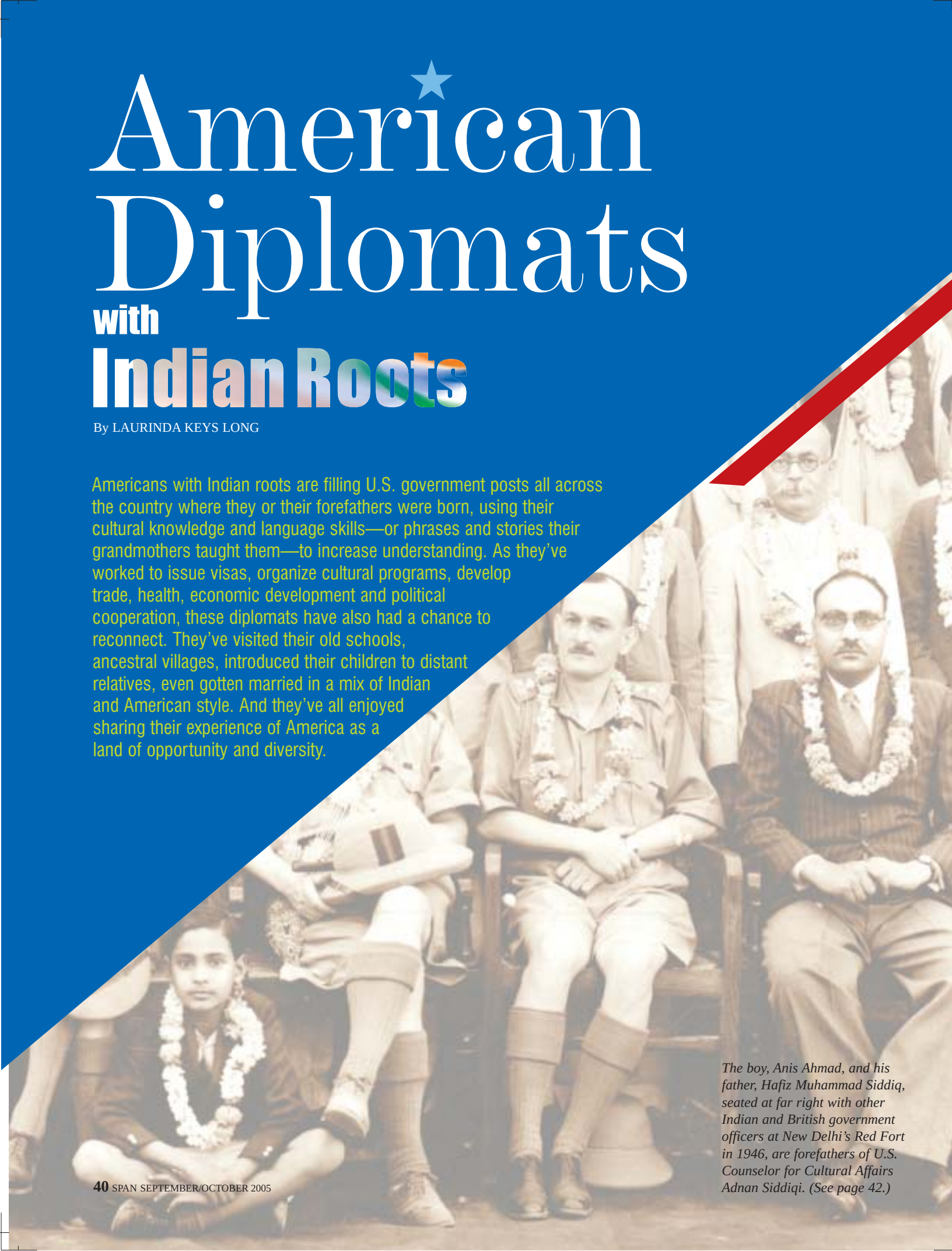
American Diplomats with Indian Roots

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

Americans with Indian roots are filling U.S. government posts all across the country where they or their forefathers were born, using their cultural knowledge and language skills—or phrases and stories their grandmothers taught them—to increase understanding. As they've worked to issue visas, organize cultural programs, develop trade, health, economic development and political cooperation, these diplomats have also had a chance to reconnect. They've visited their old schools, ancestral villages, introduced their children to distant relatives, even gotten married in a mix of Indian and American style. And they've all enjoyed sharing their experience of America as a land of opportunity and diversity.



The boy, Anis Ahmad, and his father, Hafiz Muhammad Siddiq, seated at far right with other Indian and British government officers at New Delhi's Red Fort in 1946, are forefathers of U.S. Counselor for Cultural Affairs Adnan Siddiqi. *(See page 42.)*

VINAY CHAWLA

Immigrants' son comes back as diplomat: That story can only be told in America," says **VINAY CHAWLA**, 29, a consular officer in New Delhi. "My parents were the byproducts of Partition," says Chawla. The two families fled Pakistan and landed in neighboring villages in what is now Haryana. After their marriage Chawla's parents moved to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. "They went for what everyone goes to America for, a better opportunity, having a stake in society, making your own way," says Chawla, adding that in the 1960s and 1970s, when his parents emigrated, opportunities to "control your own destiny" were rare in India, although "it is changing now."

Chawla's father had earned a PhD in chemistry from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Kanpur. "Before that, no one in the family had gone to college or university," says Chawla. "One of my uncles still runs a sweet shop. My dad worked there when he was young. He made *burfee* in huge vats of sugar."

Having grown up on blander American flavors, Chawla says he finds the Indian candy too sweet. He did live in New Delhi for a time as a child, when his father taught at IIT, Delhi. Chawla studied Hindi for six months during his Foreign Service training and progressed well because of his exposure to the language when he was young. He picked up even more working at the visa window in the Embassy in New Delhi. His only problem, Chawla says, is "when an Indian American comes to the window and says, 'I'd like to speak to an American officer,' and when I tell him I am, he demands, 'Show me your passport.' "

Chawla's wife, Ritu, who worked in New Delhi as a TV journalist, was born in Chicago, where the two met at Northwestern University. "There was no arrangement," he says. "For that I'm thankful for being American. From different castes, different parts of India, if we had lived in India and followed cultural norms we wouldn't have gotten together."

It's easy for the Chawlas to fit in India, he says, until they betray American cultural habits. "We always are the first to show up at any party and people say, 'It must be the Americans.' "

The Chawlas were married in India. "It was a Hindu wedding, but very American: short ceremony, efficient crowd control. But we did have elephants and horses and it started late and ended late," he says. "There were uncles from two generations back, with long mustaches, and embassy officials in suits. I was proud to see all these categories come together."

He laughs recalling the offer from their parents: "We'll come and take care of everything."

Instead, he says, "They had no idea how to get things done, they had to learn how to negotiate from us. Our parents had become too American. They expected to find a wedding planner and the Yellow Pages," an American phone directory listing stores and services by category and location.

Chawla said one of his most gratifying jobs has been interviewing people in the last step of the immigration process. "I enjoy telling them they're on their way to becoming an American citizen," he says.

The greatest reward is one he did not anticipate. "I can explain America in a way that may not be accepted coming from another American. I can tell them, `You can't say it's not a country that gives everyone a chance. I'm a living example.' " □

"What everyone goes to America for, a better opportunity, having a stake in society, making your own way."

LAURINDA KEYS LONG

Right: Vinay Chawla at the U.S. Embassy.

ADNAN SIDDIQI

U.S. government-funded Fulbright scholarships, which bring people from other nations to study at American universities and send American scholars abroad, have played a role in the family histories of many of the American officers in India. For **ADNAN SIDDIQI**, the U.S. Counselor for Cultural Affairs, the story has come full circle. It was a Fulbright that brought his Indian-born father to the United States from Pakistan in the 1960s. Now Siddiqi is chairman of the board of USEFI (the United States Education Foundation in India), which administers the Fulbrights, providing opportunities to others.

On Siddiqi's office wall at the American Center in New Delhi is an old photograph of his father, Anis Ahmad, as a boy, and grandfather, Hafiz Muhammad Siddiq, among other British and Indian government officers at the Red Fort in 1946. Anis, born in Kanpur, earned his law degree from Aligarh Muslim University, moved to Karachi where he married Delhi native Qamar Sultana Mirza, and in 1959 Adnan Siddiqi was born. Siddiqi was just four when he and his mother joined Anis, who was studying at Columbia University Law School in New York as a Fulbrighter.

"Now you have large Asian American communities. Then, there were just a handful," says Siddiqi, who felt isolated and different growing up. "My first school was a nursery school in a church. In junior high I went to a Catholic school, because the standards were higher." After six years in New York, his parents felt Siddiqi and his U.S.-born brothers "were getting too Americanized." The boys and their mother went back to Pakistan. "I remember being reduced to tears the first time I took an Urdu test for school. I couldn't even understand the question," says Siddiqi, who had used a more colloquial version of the language at home in New York. He later studied Hindi at university and practiced by writing letters to relatives in India. Now both languages "make it much easier for me to make friends. People are more frank with me," he says.

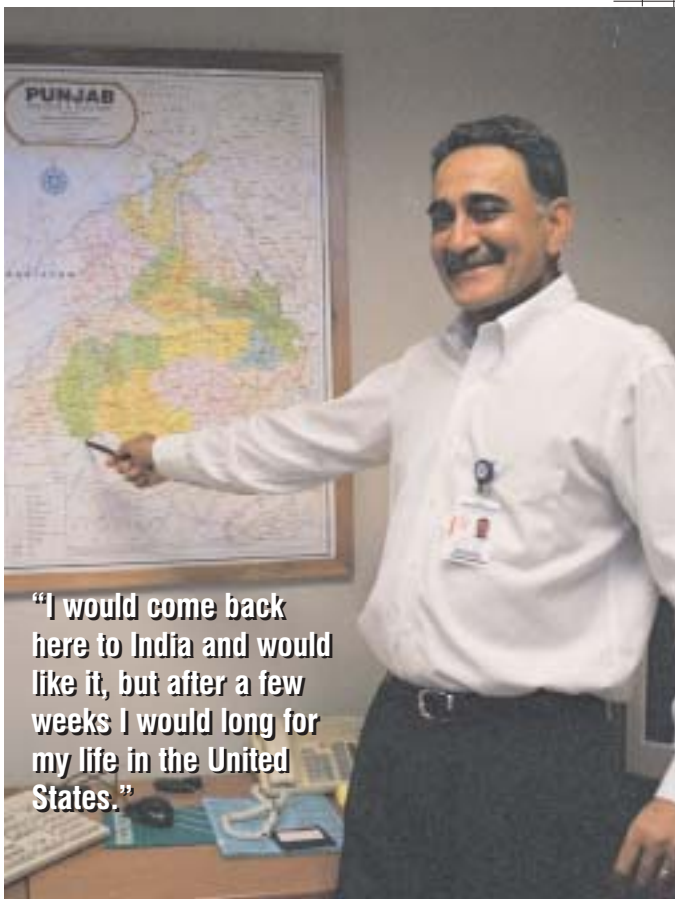
In Karachi, Siddiqi learned to play cricket, enjoyed flying kites, something kids in New York City don't do, and was a celebrity among his neighbors because of his strange-looking American "barracuda" bicycle. The family was undecided about whether to emigrate permanently, but living through the 1970-71 India-Pakistan War settled the question. They returned to the United States after just two years in Pakistan. In 1980 Siddiqi, then 19, joined his parents in becoming citizens. "I didn't think it would be an emotional thing until I was asked to give up all ties to the region," he says. "I looked around the room at these other people doing the same thing. But it took a couple of years until I started feeling American."

During undergraduate study at Columbia College he joined the India Club and, as a hobby, tried his hand at translating Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib's poetry into English. "I thought it was a way to bring the cultures together," he says. "It wasn't published or appreciated." Siddiqi earned a master's degree in international relations from Columbia University. But he hit the job

"I feel connected to both countries, India and Pakistan. It *was* all one country."

Above: The 1946 photo of his father and grandfather in Adnan Siddiqi's office. Right: Anis Ahmad Siddiqi of New York, visiting his granddaughter, Nilofer, 5, and son Adnan Siddiqi in New Delhi.

PUSHPINDER DHILLON



LAURINDA KEYS LONG

In his office, Pushpinder Dhillon points out Badal.

market during the U.S. recession of 1981-82 and couldn't find work for five months. He went to work for a publishing house, at a lower salary than he was expecting, but in a beautiful office overlooking New York City with a chance to develop his expertise in cultural relations and eventually travel to Europe as a sales representative. "It was a dream job in terms of corporate America," he says. "This is how you start. That company experience later helped me pass the Foreign Service exam. As a mid-level manager you have to handle an in-box, delegate, hold a meeting and decide what to do."

Siddiqi has spent much of his 22-year diplomatic career in the Middle East. He speaks Arabic and met his wife in Tunisia. But he wanted his children to "discover their roots, see what the other half of the family looks like" and obtained the posting to India in August 2004.

"I'm not from here, but I do have a historical affinity. My roots are from Delhi and Uttar Pradesh," he says. "I feel connected to both countries, India and Pakistan. It *was* all one country. More doors are opened to me and people feel comfortable around me. But I went through 15 years of isolation from this part of the world. It was a surprise to me, but in some ways I'm just as much learning the ropes and discovering new things as any other American." ☐

HEMANT BHATNAGAR

PUSHPINDER DHILLON, the Economic Affairs Officer who helped bring about the new India-U.S. open skies agreement, says the process of becoming an American was a gradual journey, based on becoming comfortable with the society and value system.

"What I really like about the U.S. is it's as pure a meritocracy as you can find anywhere," he says. "If you do your job well, whatever it is, it doesn't matter where you are from, what your color or background is. In many societies, the identity of someone is as the son of or daughter of so-and-so. People ask, 'Who is your father, what is your background?' In the U.S., it's, 'What do you do?' "

Born in the Punjab village of Badal in 1957, Dhillon went to the University of Chicago to earn his master's degree in finance. "I had full intentions of returning to India," he says. "But it's a process that creeps up on you. After four years in college I realized it was the place I wanted to live. I liked the system. It unbundles you from a lot of the constraints and limits that exist in India. I would come back here to India and would like it, but after a few weeks I would long for my life in the United States."

When it came time to become a U.S. citizen, he says, "It wasn't that difficult. I felt it was my country. It was where I belonged."

By then, Dhillon had lived in some of the most beautiful parts of the United States, in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest. One of his first jobs was for the Alaska State Legislature. "The oil pipeline had come on line. Oil revenues were flooding in. They were looking for economists, professionals to help develop the state. I thought it would be a very good opportunity for a year. I stayed five years, the longest I stayed anywhere."

He then worked in Seattle, Washington, and Portland, Oregon, and married another Indian-born American. "I have always been open to alternate careers and I took the Foreign Service exam as a lark," Dhillon says. When he first joined, his wife stayed behind as she had a good job in Portland.

Dhillon was posted to Barbados, Berlin, Washington, D.C., Bangladesh, Washington, D.C., then India. He has two daughters, 13 and 8, who are picking up Punjabi and seeing a lot of their grandparents. The children "threaten to disown me if I leave," says Dhillon. The family loves to visit Badal, where Dhillon's mother still lives.

"I missed my parents when I first went to the U.S. Telephone rates were very high. Travel was very expensive. I missed a certain slow pace that is India, where the line between work and leisure is sort of blurred. I missed the afternoon siesta. I missed a whole generation of cricket!" he laments. "When I went to Barbados I watched some of the best cricket, and made up for it."

Dhillon's job is "to show up, fly the flag, to advocate for American interests and to promote and deepen the economic ties between India and the United States. We encourage Indian economic reform, because Indian growth and prosperity are in the U.S. interest. We are on the cusp of a radically new partnership between the two countries. We have many differences, but I fully agree with observers who liken the two countries to natural allies, bound together by shared values, identical threats and common interests."

Dhillon says, "I like being a citizen of a country that has been a benign power for the most part, not unlike India. I disagree sometimes with policy, but when all is said and done, it mostly uses its power for good, for doing many things because they are the right things to do for mankind." ☐

"It was my chance to do good by the quintessential American taxpayer for the implicit faith he had given that I would do well."

Left: Ravi Candadai interacts with young visitors to the American Corner in Bangalore. Below: Candadai speaks at a U.S. Navy Band concert.

RAVI CANDADAI

RAVI CANDADAI is the Public Affairs Officer in Chennai, handling speakers, programs, international visitor exchanges, overseeing the American Information Resource Center and acting as a spokesman for the United States in southern India, a region that includes his birthplace, Hyderabad.

"I attribute all of this to my grandmother," says Candadai. "She wrote to my uncle, who had gone to the U.S. as a Fulbrighter from 1958 to 1963, returned there in 1969 and was living in Ogden, Utah. 'Do something about this boy,' she said, asking if there was an opening in the U.S. for me to continue my studying."

There was. Candadai went to Weber State University in Utah, earning a bachelor's degree in business administration as he worked as a part-time janitor, changing light bulbs and buffing classroom floors to save money to attend Idaho State University, where he earned a master's degree (MBA) in marketing.

Candadai's subsequent career was a mix of teaching business and management while working in executive marketing and sales positions in the telecommunications industry in Seattle. At the time he became a U.S. citizen and got his passport he was encouraged to take the Foreign Service exam. Candadai had a house overlooking Puget Sound and was chairman of the business school at North Seattle Community College. "My plate was full. My cup was running over," he says. "However, it was my chance to do good by the quintessential American taxpayer for the implicit faith he had given that I would do well."

He joined the Foreign Service in 1991 and worked in Monterrey, Mexico; London, Egypt and Chile. Following 9/11 he felt a strong urge to do right by the country that had adopted him as one of its own. He left his family behind in Texas when he volunteered for an assignment in Islamabad as the Deputy Economic Counselor, overseeing trade, intellectual property rights and World Trade Organization issues.

Candadai says colleagues at the State Department have teased him sometimes, asking, "Were you recruited for the Chennai job because you were an Indian?" But he answers, "I had to compete for this job." He speaks Urdu, Telugu, Hindi, Tamil, Arabic and Spanish. The language ability "may give me the first minute of being able to get past the gatekeeper, but that's just an edge in the full dialogue of diplomacy."

Candadai jokes that he is never mistaken for an Indian, however, because at 47 he has silver hair, and doesn't dye it. His wife is a Texan of Mexican heritage and the family speaks Spanish at home, although his children have discovered the "magic" of getting things done if they speak Tamil.

Coming to Chennai has given him a chance to catch up with family and friends, but he says his mother doesn't have time to spoil his children because she is "busy teaching computer skills to housewives in the house where I grew up." She's carrying on the family tradition of valuing education, epitomized by his grandmother. □

BHASKAR RAJAH

"I liked what America stood for, the multiculturalism, democracy that is ingrained in the society, the independence, the quest for fairness, the support of individual rights."

A friend's offer of a movie and a ride on a motorbike enticed **BHASKAR RAJAH** to listen to a speech on American education by a Foreign Service officer in his hometown of Chennai some 25 years ago. Now Rajah, the U.S. Assistant Public Affairs Officer in Calcutta, gives similar speeches, encouraging young Indians to widen their horizons.

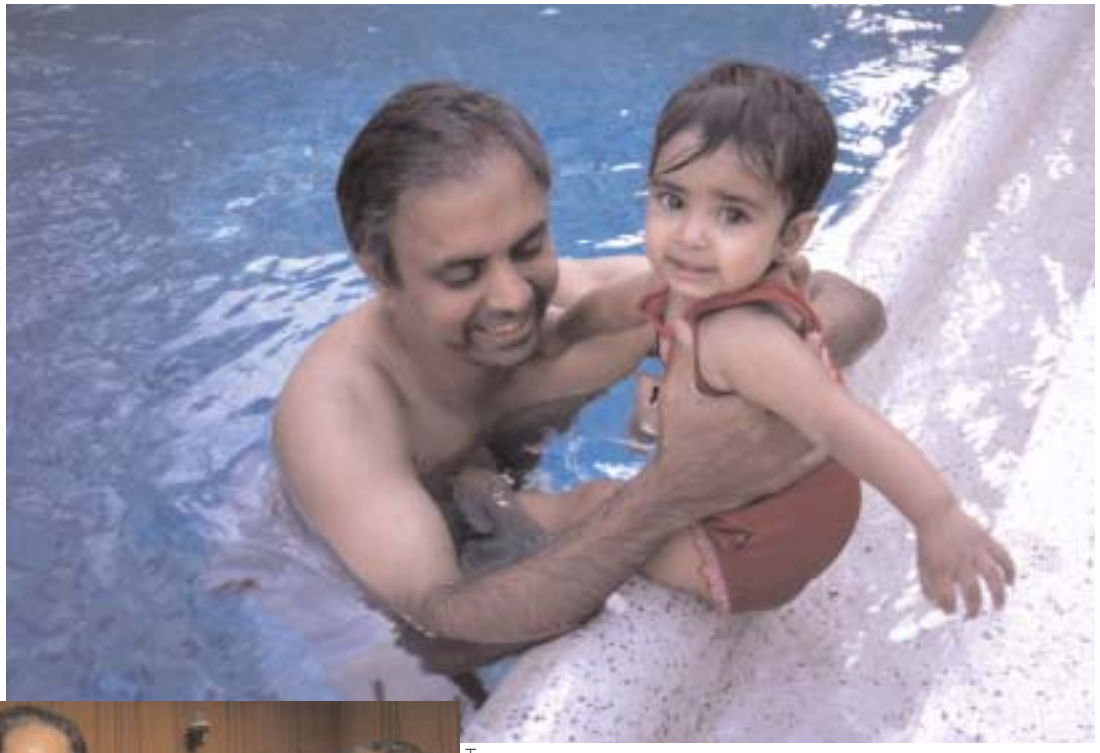
Rajah's friend wanted to go to the United States to study, and asked his buddy to come along to a seminar at the American Center. "I said I am not going," Rajah recalls. "But he said, 'Well, we can go to a movie afterward.' And he had a wonderful motorbike and I always wanted to ride his bike, so he said, 'Maybe you can ride it on the way back.' After hearing the American officer speak, a lot of us in the audience broadened our perspectives on higher education in the U.S. As luck would have it, two years later, I went to the U.S., to Ohio, as an exchange visitor, and my friend who took me to the seminar never did go."

Rajah's first experiences weren't all pleasant. "Cleveland was cold, and the wind off Lake Erie started blowing too early in October," he recalls. "Also, in 1982, the university was in deep financial problems and during my first semester they said they would not be able to offer me a continued scholarship for my MBA program." So Rajah turned to Oklahoma, which was experiencing an oil boom, and accepted an offer from the State University, where he earned his degree. "I got a wonderful education and above that, it gave me an insight into those parts of the U.S., the heart of America, which otherwise I would never have understood," he says. When his studies ended, Rajah attended the 1984 summer Olympics in Los Angeles and toured as much of the United States as he could, thinking he would never get a chance to come back.

In Colorado, a horseshoe distributor offered him room and board in return for setting up some computers. The man's business was suffering, so over breakfast, Rajah used his knowledge from his MBA program to suggest avenues for diversification. "One of them was manufacturing and that has kept him going for the last 20 years. We are good friends, still," says Rajah. "We would go horseback riding on the slopes of the Rocky Mountains and that is one of my best memories."

When Rajah returned home, however, he found it hard to get work. "The typical response I got was, 'You are overqualified; you have been to the U.S. and we don't think you will really stay here for long.' " Eventually, an Indian company sent him to Chicago to start up a U.S. office. It was there that he met his wife to be, with whom he now has three daughters, and where he later became a U.S. citizen. "I felt I was completely in sync with U.S. ideals and philosophies and I saw myself as culturally an Indian and in politico-economic perspectives an American," he says. "I liked what America stood for, the multiculturalism, democracy that is ingrained in the society, the independence, the quest for fairness, the support of individual rights." He worked in international business, banking and information technology in Australia, Dubai, San Francisco and India before he was encouraged to join the Foreign Service by Hugh Williams, then the U.S. consul in Chennai. There were some bureaucratic glitches in the process. At one point, Rajah said, he was told his application was denied and closed, because the Immigration and Naturalization Service still had him listed as a student in Oklahoma and could not verify his citizenship.

Rajah responded, "That's the one thing I *can* prove." □



JAYALAKSHMI BHASKAR

KARUNA SINGH

Above: Bhaskar Rajah and daughter Vijaishri at the Calcutta Consulate swimming pool. Left: Rajah gives a booklet on U.S.-India relations to Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi.

JAI NAIR

"The way my grandmother and aunt remembered it would have been inaccurate....I was expecting to see their rural India. But here in New Delhi, a big city is like any big city."

JAI NAIR, the child of immigrants from Kerala and Scotland, is part of a "tandem couple" program in the U.S. Foreign Service. He and his wife, Siriana, have each taken a turn at jobs as consular and political officers in New Delhi since they arrived in February 2004.

The visa work can be stressful, says Nair. "You have to make quick decisions all the time. You try to make the right decisions. With the growth in U.S.-India business relations there has been an enormous growth of visa work. With so many people traveling back and forth, we're having a hard time keeping up. We are adding new windows as fast as we can in consulates and the embassy."

His political work involved talking with Indian officials, academics, other diplomats and reporting to Washington on "India's priorities, where the U.S. can match up and interact." Nair has a physics degree from Harvard and a master's in nuclear engineering from the University of Maryland. He worked as an analyst in the natural gas industry and in aircraft avionics before joining the Foreign Service.

In India, his first posting, Nair says, "People are tickled that I'm half Indian and have responsibility in the U.S. government. It's a good thing for American policy for people to see I'm doing the same thing as someone of an all-European background."

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Jai Nair at theU.S. Embassy.

Nair says he is most proud of "my parents' and grandparents' actions, more than just where they came from. My dad started working his way through school, became an electrical engineer, got into computer systems starting out, then quit his job, and said, 'I can do it on my own.'"

It wasn't until Nair got a chance to visit his father's boarding school, Lawrence in Tamil Nadu, that he fully understood why he was so incredibly disciplined. "We went to the school and the motto is on all their blazers: 'Never give in,' " says Nair.

Nair's father, Prasad, a native of Chengannur in Kerala, emigrated to the United States with his parents and younger sister at the age of 16, when his father, V.S.P. Nair, an Indian Air Force squadron leader, was posted to the Indian Embassy in Washington, D.C., as an assistant air attaché.

When V.S.P. Nair died of a heart attack, his wife stayed on to let her children finish their studies. Prasad Nair decided to remain in the United States after finishing college. He married an immigrant from Scotland and their three children were born in America.

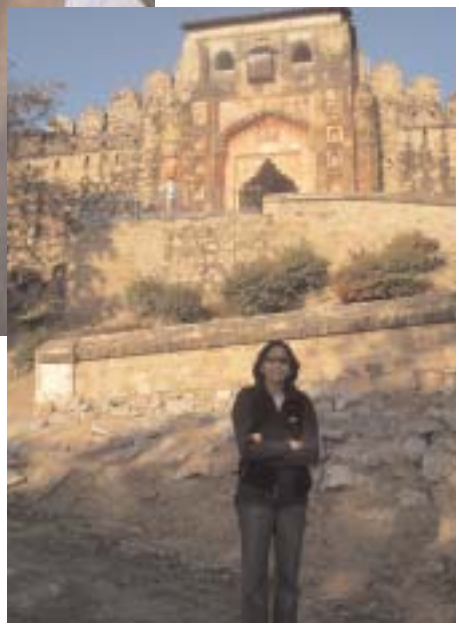
"My grandmother and aunt would tell us stories" about India, Nair says. He had a chance to visit Kerala last November, "see the old family home, see where the coconut fields were, and the politics. It was interesting seeing red hammer-and-sickle flags."

Nair had not visited India before. "Something that was shocking for an American, even growing up knowing about it, is the really strong class differences. I'm not referring just to caste," he says. "It's surprising how people here treat their superiors and subordinates. It would make most Americans uncomfortable. It's a surprise when you go into a wealthy home, ornate, well-furnished, then you step into the kitchen and it changes; it's not the space of the residents of the house. But the growth of the middle class is breaking that down."

He says, "The India I learned about growing up has really changed, now especially with the economic changes. But the way my grandmother and aunt remembered it would have been inaccurate whether India had changed or not. I was expecting to see more of their rural India. But here in New Delhi, a big city is like any big city." □

LAURINDA KEYS LONG

VIRAJ LEBAILLY



"Part of the fun of being here is people are so interested in what is going on, and they want to talk about the U.S. and India."

Left: Viraj LeBailly enjoying Jhansi, in Uttar Pradesh, and in her office at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi.

VIRAJ LEBAILLY, who worked as a consular and political officer in New Delhi, was born in Connecticut to parents who went to the United States from Gujarat as students. LeBailly took the Foreign Service exams when she was a graduate student, and joined soon after she received her master's degree in international relations from Yale University.

"What interests me most about the Foreign Service is America's foreign policy. I'm interested in travel and seeing places, meeting people and explaining what we're about and the U.S. perspective on issues," she says. "I get out and speak with government officials and others about U.S. policies. Part of the fun of being here is people are so interested in what is going on, and they want to talk about the U.S. and India."

LeBailly's husband, Etienne, is also a Foreign Service officer, who worked in the consular and economic sections in New Delhi. His mother is a first-generation American from France. The couple met at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, and married after graduate school. "We had a Hindu wedding ceremony, modified to what we could get done in Connecticut," she says, "so no elephants, and it took one afternoon." They've enjoyed traveling throughout India and exploring less visited parts of the country.

LeBailly's parents met in the United States and settled in Connecticut, where they found job opportunities, after her father studied engineering and her mother microbiology.

LeBailly first came to India very soon after she was born, to meet her grandparents. She came a couple more times growing up and after graduating from college.

"I remember coming here and meeting aunts and uncles whose names I knew," she says. "We tended to come in the summer when it was very hot, and we would bring water toys to give to our cousins. We also brought foods from home that we missed and could share with the other children."

Coming back as a diplomat, she says, "has given me an opportunity to emphasize to people I meet that America is full of people like me, with backgrounds of all kinds, who can come from all over and can do anything, including represent their government. America is not a homogenous place."

When she has children, LeBailly says, "I would want them to know about their grandparents and India's history, which perhaps will be part of what they learn in school." □